

Committee on Resources

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TESTIMONY

of

Richard "Rick" Jones

AMVETS National Legislative Director

before the

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks,

Recreation, and Public Lands

U.S. House of Representatives

on

H.R. 1442, a bill to design and construct a
visitor center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, 10:00 AM

Vietnam Veterans Memorial, The National Mall

Chairman Radanovich, Ranking Member Christensen and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of National Commander W.G. "Bill" Kilgore and the nationwide membership of AMVETS (American Veterans), I thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands on H.R. 1442, a bill to design and construct a visitor center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. My name is Rick Jones and I serve as the AMVETS National Legislative Director.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS has been a leader since 1944 in helping to preserve the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces. Today, our organization, composed of a large number of Vietnam veterans, continues its proud tradition, providing, not only support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements, but also an array of community services that enhance the quality of life for this nation's citizens.

AMVETS strongly supports this legislation. We firmly believe that the development of this center will greatly enhance the experience of those who come to this memorial.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a source of a host of emotions from pride of service to sadness of loss. It is one of the most loved and frequently visited memorials in Washington, D.C., and it means so much to all those who visit to see the name of their grandfather, father, spouse, acquaintance or friend engraved into the black granite. Here alongside 58,235 other heroes whose names are etched on the Wall, these brave men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice are not forgotten.

As you know, only the names of veterans killed during the Vietnam War or who subsequently died from combat-related injuries can be on the Wall. Relatives, friends or others submit names to the Defense Department. It verifies the information, then tells the National Park Service and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. The nonprofit organization, which built the Wall, pays to add the names.

And, each one deserves to be listed. Our Nation honors them at this site on our majestic National Mall. As

we look around ourselves today, we are surrounded by monuments and symbols of our freedom so many have fought to protect. These structures honor those who have made our nation what it is today. By their service and endeavor, those so honored have helped establish a nation that continues to live up to its creed and face challenges to freedom of the present and future.

Today, AMVETS reaffirms its commitment to adding a visitor center to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We have supported construction of a visitor center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial for nearly six years, when delegates to our 1997 convention in Orlando, Florida, approved a national resolution to establish a place on this site to help people gain a better understanding of the Memorial.

For 21 years, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has stood in quiet tribute to those brave individuals who offered the ultimate sacrifice for freedom so long ago. For many of us gathered here today, the war in Vietnam was the key event in our lives, a touchstone that has shaped who and what we have become as adults. However, for those of younger generations and generations yet born, the events and people that encompass the "Vietnam War" are merely history, the stuff of textbooks.

AMVETS believes that adding a visitor center to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial will create a richer, more profound experience for visitors, especially young people. This center will afford visitors a place to offer written reactions to the memorial and thereby establish a historical archive available to future visitors. The center will offer space to store and display the many and varied items placed in remembrance at the memorial and provide a computer database of those honored on the memorial. And in large part, it will help pay homage to these special Americans who the nation records as true patriots.

AMVETS believes the cause and purpose of the fighting man and woman in Vietnam was no different than that fought for by those brave Americans who currently serve or have served in America's other conflicts and wars. The 3.4 million Americans who served in the Southeast Asia Theater and the 58,235 memorialized on this Wall fought for freedom and each other, our nation must never forget their loyalty and valor. The burdens and struggles endured by these brave men and women, both during and after the battle, must be taught to our children so they can understand what the Vietnam War was and develop a strong respect for those who served.

Mr. Chairman, just as the places called Yorktowne, Gettysburg and Normandy have been woven into our nation's historical fabric, so must the sacrifices offered at Ia Drang Valley, Khe Sanh, and Hamburger Hill. Many sacrificed their lives in the name of duty, honor and country and the visitor center can help make the Wall a bridge to commemorate and never forget their lives.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present testimony to your panel on H.R. 1442, a bill to design and construct a visitor center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We appreciate your consideration and commitment to serving our nation's veterans and their families, and we look forward to passage of this important project.